



Inside CFSA

For Our Child-Serving Community

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Improvements in Congregate Care Benefit Children ***Commitment to Placing Child in Family Settings Grows***

Following is the full text of a response by CFSA Director Olivia Golden and Carolyn Graham, deputy mayor for Children, Youth, Families And Elders. The Washington Post published an edited version as a letter to the editor on August 14th.

Protection for abused and neglected children in the District has never been strong enough. However, the opportunity to change that shameful situation has never been better.

Working in cooperation with the Mayor, the courts, service providers, and others throughout the community, the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency is constructing a reliable safety net for local children and families. There are no quick fixes, but in the past decade, many troubled child protection systems in large cities across the country have instituted significant reforms—and so, too, is the District. One of the most important local changes involves moving away from reliance on group care to foster family care for children who cannot be safe at home.

Significant Reforms Underway

The D.C. Child and Family Services Agency returned from Federal court to city control in June 2001, and is now just over one year old as a District agency. At that time, the Federal court prepared baseline performance measures for the agency as well as a special report on group homes. These documents showed that the District had far too many children, especially young ones, living in group homes rather than with relatives or foster families. Too often, the group homes lacked sufficient funding and staff. Regulations regarding quality, a licensing process, and a reliable system for reporting and investigating allegations of abuse and neglect in these facilities all did not exist.

In the past year, several significant reforms have been achieved. Last September, for the first time, the District established regulations governing quality in group homes serving children and youth. Next, CFSA created an internal unit to license and monitor group homes, and we are on track to meet a licensing deadline of January 1, 2003. The Mayor's proposed FY '03 budget includes resources to assist group-home providers in meeting staffing and other requirements for licensure. In addition, CFSA established a unit to investigate reports of abuse and neglect in out-of-home care, including group facilities. We closed three emergency shelters that, at the time, housed 45 children of all ages. We also focused on reducing the number of

children under age six in group care and have cut that number in half so far.

Recent Actions Mean Further Improvement

In response to recent events, CFSA has redoubled its efforts. In addition to taking tough administrative actions to address two specific incidents that came to light last week, social workers visited all CFSA children under age 12 in group homes. Of a total 118 children, we checked on the safety and well being of 100 within 24 hours. Now, a clinical team is comparing reports from those visits with group home monitoring records and planning how to move as many children as possible into family settings.

In addition, CFSA notified group home providers and our own staff that they must report child abuse and neglect immediately to our 24-hour line, (202) 671-SAFE. For professionals who work with children, failure to report abuse and neglect violates District law. We will refer any such failures to the Corporation Counsel for prosecution. We will also explore raising the penalties for willful failure to report.

Community Support is Urgently Needed

While licensing will give us a powerful new tool to regulate the quality of group care, this and all other reforms of group homes are not enough. Ample evidence exists that children grow up better with stable caretakers and opportunities to learn everyday life skills. So, after decades of reliance on group care, the District is now committed to placing children in family settings when they cannot be safe in their birth homes.

Clearly, we cannot meet this goal without community involvement. The District urgently needs neighbors to support troubled families and help them stay together. We need foster families to nurture children temporarily while their parents overcome crises. We need adoptive parents to open their homes and hearts for a lifetime.

Every District resident who wants to help can call (202) 671-LOVE for information about how to become part of the solution. When the whole community uses outrage as a call to action, we can vastly speed up construction of the strong safety net our children and families deserve. •

CFSA faxes this newsletter monthly to providers and other partners. To provide comments or to update your fax number, call 202-442-6174.
